

# Eight Ball

by Hugh Raymond

**The making of those carved ivory balls-within-balls is an art, no doubt. But it seems there's a certain trick to it, a trick that, if it goes wrong, does not put you behind the eight ball exactly, rather—**

Illustrated by Kelliker.

Carrying Professor Quoit home was no cinch. He was heavy, bulky, unwieldy and smelly. Besides he was drunk. Stewed to the mouth of the gills. And tangled something awful in a billowy spring overcoat. I opened the front door, groped around in the darkness with one hand for the switch and shoved the professor against the wall with the other. He swayed and almost fell. But the lights went on abruptly and I caught him. He lurched again, but Pooh Bah was on the job. I heaved him conscientiously into the living room.

It's not exactly my job. Quoit holds down the chair of Oriental Art at Cosmopolitan University—when he isn't stiff as a board which is almost all the time. I'm an Egyptologist myself—beautiful sounding title, isn't it? We're a dime a dozen, so don't let's kid ourselves—and I can assume the job of No. 1 boy without danger of lese majesty.

You've just got to be nice to the professor. He laughs most of the time and spends the rest proving that life is the best thing in life. Everybody loves him to death. He's essentially the Robert Benchley type—sober and drunk both—and cute as a kitten.

Nobody ever tries to make him stop drinking. He went on the wagon once for a week and promptly fell into sixteen distinct and quivering pieces. "A highball is better than a squall," he is used to saying, paraphrasing Aldous Huxley.

Why he drinks I can't say. He seldom talks of his private affairs. It is known that he once had a lovely wife and three beautiful children in China. Something terrible happened there. Something like the plague or maybe it was the bombing of Shanghai. He came home without them. And so help me Amenhotep they have nothing to do with *the* story.

This particular evening we'd spent at

Arnoldi's, which the New York readers may remember is the place in Greenwich Village where congregate down-at-the-heel authors, threadbare artists, dismembered poets, discarded vice presidents of colleges and boogie-woogie players anxious to acquire some tone. Why Quoit liked the place, I don't know. He kept dragging me around to sit by the hour in its taproom and be bored to death listening to the birdlike chirping of its denizens. Quoit drank three straight Scotches the minute he got settled behind the table and kept ordering double brandies all evening. He met his Waterloo on the twentieth.

He lay on the couch where I dumped him and went to the wall to turn on the parlor lights. As they lit up the place with their mellow glow, he opened his eyes, turned them around the room like marbles stuck on sticks and yelped suddenly.

"My rubber ball!" He sat up with a jerk, the color draining out of his face and threw his hands into the air, "Andy, my rubber ball!"

I came out of the kitchen sour-faced, disinclined to fool around any more and decidedly annoyed.

"What rubber ball?" I bellowed, pitching my hat and coat onto a nearby chair and diving for him. He was already on his hands and knees crawling toward a curiously colored ball which rolled out of the south bedroom and hopped across the floor to meet him.

I knew instantaneously that something was amiss. I had imbibed enough alcohol to make me stutter once or twice at Arnoldi's, but I was cold sober now. This was on a par with Pixies and little men who suddenly appear to clean out the icebox or else your shoes won't be cobbled by morning or the cow will die.

"What rubber ball?" The words died on my lips as it came into sight, *hopping* and hopping straight to Quoit. The strangled look came out of his eyes as he caught it on a short fly, took it into

his arms and caressed it like the bald pate of a baby.

I am a man of few words and quick action. Quoit lay on the floor with the ball exactly twenty seconds. Three minutes later he was in the bathtub immersed to the chin and toenails in icy water. I emptied the icebox into the tub and had him uncoiled within two hours.

"Oh, that—" he said offhandedly to a question of mine as he staggered out of the bathroom. His eyes caught the ball again. It was still laying on the floor where I'd put it after forcing it from his grasp. He tightened his bathrobe belt, walked over to it, picked it up and again cradled the thing. He pointed to it with one hand and raised it in the other, squeezing its smooth contours.

"Meet Asun Poy, professor; professor," he winked at me, "meet Asunt Poy." He collapsed suddenly on the couch and held his hands to his temples for a while. The ball, having dropped from his grasp, bounced once or twice on the floor, gained impetus and landed beside him with a soft *plop*. It seemed to cuddle close.

He looked up again and crooked a finger. I came and sat down.

"Andy," he said, tragically, "you are the possessor of many of my secrets." He put one hand into his robe and assumed the air of a Shakespearean ham. "You shall presently know another. A moment, I beg of you, of rest and quiet." He put his fingers to his head again and stayed that way for several minutes.

I lit a cigarette.

"Andy—"

I looked up. He was sitting back gazing dreamily at the wall. One hand caressed the ball.

"Remember the China Trade and Its Influences exhibit?"

I nodded. He was referring to an exhibition of Oriental art we had seen



a few days previously at the Cosmopolitan Museum.

"Remember the ivory ball, Andy? You couldn't understand how they managed to carve seven small balls within the big one, each inside the other?"

I was instantly alert. As I recalled through the haze of several days, the problem had been tantalizing. The im-

age formed slowly in my mind. A giant pierced ball of ivory decorated with intricate carvings. Within the outside shell, which was approximately an eighth of an inch thick, were seven small spheres each smaller than the other and working down to a tiny solid sphere at the very center of the whole thing; a contemporary piece and gorge-

ously carved. A riddle, too. The successive shells were uncut and finished on the inside as well as the outer surface. It had looked like an impossibility. I remembered suddenly Quoit's amused smile in answer to a question I had put concerning their construction. So!

He held his free hand on my knee.

"Asun Poy, Asun Poy—" he breathed heavily, "he was a Russian-Chinese—"

I took a deep breath and settled back. Quoit's face had assumed the stern look which preceded his lectures.

"He was a Russian-Chinese," I repeated as he paused.

"He lived in Shanghai," continued Quoit, "and he was a very strange man. Mary liked him and the kids liked him. He was about my build, but shorter, and he spoke English with a Russian accent. I met him early in '29. That was on my first trip to China. That was when I brought back old Chung's funeral pieces—the ones they've salted away on the third floor. Mary had a suite in the Imperial. I used to go into the interior every four weeks and pick up a couple of tons of gilded bric-à-brac. Two or three ounces of it were genuine. I met him in a little village about six hundred miles to the west. The Japs bombed it two weeks ago, I think. It was called H'Aning Po and it was at the junction of two small rivers. Asun Poy was standing at the dock one afternoon as I was bargaining with my local agent over a sack of junk. I was arguing loudly and my agent was doing the same, and it began to look as though I'd never get the one valuable bit I wanted. Asun Poy walked up to the Chinese and spoke a few words. I looked at him curiously. His was a strange face in that part of the country—long, gaunt, Eurasian, with a hint of French in his eyes. His skin was very white. His hands were long and spatulate. I listened to his talk for a while, then as the agent suddenly turned and gave in, I tipped my pith helmet and thanked him in English.

"That's all right," he said cheerfully in a Russian accent and held out his hand. 'I'm Asun Poy.'

"I learned later, while strolling down the river bank with my precious funeral urn in one hand—the rest I'd dumped back into the Va'ho—that he was also an Orientologist mainly interested in Gobi fossils and Ch'u pottery, which is rather scarce and not worth the while of any but a disinterested man. Asun Poy was disinterested. He had money by the bucket. He told me about his early life, people in the East, as you know, dissolve their barriers as soon as trust is established—he was the son of a Russian mother and a Chinese father, which had helped.

"He'd had a long and interesting artistic life spent mostly in Russia before the Bolshies took over and was a good friend of Karl Faberge, the emperor's private jeweler. His present pursuits were the Gobi fossils. The trip to H'Aning Po was sentimental. His mother was buried there.

"I left him at the hotel with the request that he call on me at any time for any assistance I was able to give and returned to my own diggings." Quoit picked the ball up and shook it. "Ah, there, Asun," he said cheerfully and placed it on the couch again a few inches away. Again it snuggled close to his side.

"Get on about Asun," I remarked and lit another cigarette.

"I heard from him the next morning. He sent a boy up to my shack with a chit. It read something like: 'You'll be interested at Shu Pai's shop. I was. Meet me there at noon.'

"Shu Pai was the proprietor of a small junk shop in the middle of town just off the main mud puddle. I dashed around—it was almost twelve. Asun was standing outside talking to Shu Pai who was a very short, chunky native of Kansu. I had difficulty following his dialect which was inter-

spersed with pidgin English. Asun took me by the arm.

"I think you'll like this." He nodded to Shu Pai and we went inside. The interior was dusty. Both Asun and I kept carefully away from the musty wares, for we were both wearing spotless white. Shu Pai lit a lantern, went in the back of his hovel and returned an instant later with an ordinary cardboard box the size of a shoe carton. This he placed on the table. He took off the top and rolled out a large ivory globe, practically the exact duplicate of the one at the China Trade. I examined it carefully, while Asun Poy watched amused. Presently I looked up, puzzled, and asked the expected question.

"You would be surprised," answered Asun in good American vernacular. He motioned to Shu Pai.

"Show the man, Shu Pai," he said. "Show the American professor how the little ivory balls get into each other." When he had finished talking, he stepped back and drew me with him.

For a moment, Shu Pai looked as though he wasn't going to do it, then Asun Poy laid a large metal coin on the table. He smiled oilily, picked up the globe and posed it above the lantern, turning it slowly.

"Melican fello look," he lisped. I leaned closer and fixed my gaze on his pudgy hands. He held the globe tightly by two of his fingers. It gleamed in the soft light of the lantern.

"Melican fello look," he repeated and extended his free hand toward the globe. Nothing happened. He reached out a finger, cocked it several times like a double-jointed man cracking his thumb and then made a few swift passes. I couldn't follow them. But suddenly his hand disappeared. It reappeared so quickly that I had no time to form an accurate mind picture of the exact appearance of the juncture of his wrist and the outer shell of the ball.

I staggered back. Asun Poy smiled.

"Amazing, isn't it?" he drawled in his Russian accent.

"What the devil did he do?" I demanded, pointing to the solid ivory ball the size of a marble Shu Pai laid on the table beside the big ball which he replaced in the box.

"He got it," replied Asun. "He got the core. Look at the ball—each one is pierced—you can count them. There should be seven. There were eight before. There's the eighth." He pointed to the ivory marble.

"I got excited.

"Make him do it again," I demanded, and put another large coin in front of Shu Pai, who looked up and barked a few words at Asun.

"He won't do it again!" said Asun, turning again to me. "He says that no Occidental must learn the secret. All this is nonsense, of course, because he's going to teach it to me. Want to learn?"

"My nod was interrupted by another series of barks from Shu Pai.

"I waited for them to subside and looked at Asun. He was mildly surprised.

"What did he say?"

"Amazing," laughed Asun Poy. "The little man warns me that the technique is dangerous. A little too far or not far enough and he say I'm likely to go out like a candle. Be a good fellow and go away, now, professor. Shu Pai is going to pedagogue."

"It was fantastic hearing him roll off Americanese in his quaint Slavic accent. He waved a finger at me.

"Come around to the hotel tomorrow morning. I'll show you then."

"I went home slowly."

"I didn't get around to the hotel until late the following afternoon, despite my intense curiosity. A telegram from Mary that the kids were sick with measles kept me busy at the wires for hours. When I finally got through

recommending every doctor in Shanghai I remembered Asun and went around. They rang his room—imagine electric bells in a two-story hotel in an overgrown mud hole in the middle of China. He didn't answer. They told me he hadn't been down all morning. I waited for about an hour, then decided to go upstairs.

"His door was locked, but as nobody was looking, I forced it—easily enough, as it was made out of wet bamboo. Asun wasn't there—at least noticeably. The room was piled high with boxes of stuff he'd been collecting from the neighborhood. On the floor was a pile of clothes—the same he was wearing when I saw him last. Beside it was a large rubber ball—this one.

"As soon as I turned my eyes on it, the ball started to move toward me—like this."

The professor threw the ball to the opposite side of the floor. It remained there momentarily, then began hopping back. My blood went cold. I distinctly felt wet fingers coursing down my spine. The ball stopped at our feet.

"Just like that," Quoit continued, "hopping and bouncing right into my hands. Asun was in it, of course. It came to me in a flash. He'd gone too far—or not far enough. The ball was merely something he was experimenting on."

I sat quietly for a while, smoking a third cigarette.

"If he's in there," I said, finally, "why don't you get him out?"

Quoit chuckled, but suddenly his face went cold and gray.

"I had it X-rayed. Nothing showed on the plate. I had it cut open. It was empty. I resealed it."

"But you said Asun Poy was in it."

He looked at me hopelessly for a moment, then a light of humor kindled again in his eyes.

"Yeah," he said and pressed the ball affectionately.

THE END.

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## SPORT STORY

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS



# The Green-eyed Monster

by Theodore Sturgeon

**Or The-Case of the Jealous Lover—which wouldn't have been so bad but that the jealous lover was a ghost, with imagination and a bad disposition plus tenacity of purpose. Getting rid of his interference was a problem—**

Illustrated by Kramer.

She said, "There's something following me!" in a throttled voice, and started to run.

It sort of got me. Maybe because she was so tiny and her hair was so white. Maybe because, white hair and all, she looked so young and helpless. But mostly, I think, because of what she said. "There's something following me." Not "someone." "Something." So I just naturally hauled out after her.

I caught her at the corner, put my hand on her shoulder. She gasped, and shot away from me. "Take it easy, lady," I panted. "I won't let it get you."

She stopped so suddenly that I almost ran her down. We stood looking at each other. She had great big dark eyes that didn't go with her hair at all. I said, "What makes you go dashing around at three o'clock of a winter's morning?"

"What makes you ask?" Her voice was smooth, musical.

"Now, look—you started this conversation."

She started to speak, and then something over my shoulder caught her eye. She froze for a second; and I was so fascinated by the play of expression in her face that I didn't follow her gaze. Abruptly she brought her eyes back to my face and then slapped it. It was a stinger. I stepped back and swore, and by the time I was finished she was halfway up the block. I stood there rubbing my cheek and let her go.

I met Henry Gade a couple of days later and told him about it. Henry is a practical psychologist. Perhaps I should say his field is practical psychology, because Henry ain't practical. He has theories. He has more damn theories than any man alive. He is thirty and bald and he makes lots of money without doing any work.

"I think she was crazy," I said.

"Ah," said Henry, and laid a finger